LAUGHTER

December 8, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
Genesis 18:9-15

"Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'" -Genesis 21:6 (NRSV)

Pictures of Mary and her baby are everywhere: on the front of countless Christmas cards, in coffee table collections of great Christmas art and museum exhibits, on church bulletins and cocktail party invitations and postage stamps. The Madonna and child is perhaps one of the most popular and recognizable poses in the whole history of posing and painting or sculpting. And if you look closely, you will observe something very interesting. Now, looking closely is important. It is one of the functions of art, and poetry, to abruptly slow down our normal high speed thought processes and sensory processes. You cannot speed read poetry, nor can you briskly walk through an exhibit and get the point. Poetry must be read out loud. Art forces you to look at a familiar scene - a flower, say - carefully, lovingly. I did it, by the way, last week: sat down with one of those coffee table books of Christmas art which we get off the shelf every December. And when I did it and forced myself to look carefully, I saw what I am talking about. Mary and the baby are frequently smiling. In many of the pictures from the 12th, 13th, 14th centuries - not exactly hilarious times by the way, times noted more for the Bubonic Plague and never-ending wars - Mary and her baby are smiling, wryly, sometimes very subtly, sometimes openly, almost chuckling or grinning, as if they know a funny secret. [Frederick Buechner, The Faces of Jesus, p. 46, 60, f.f.]

Mary and her baby are smiling wryly because there is, in fact, something funny going on. There is an unlikely divine joke: a bit of holy tom-foolery, and it's a lot older than either of them and it's still going on here and there, but that gets us ahead of ourselves.

There is, as a matter of fact, a laugh track throughout the Bible. Remember laugh tracks? In the early days of television sit coms, the actors and actresses would do their comedy rou-

tines, and later the technicians would "dub in" pre-recorded, or "canned" laughter. They're still doing it, I learned, even though most sit coms are recorded with a live audience. If the audience isn't enthusiastic enough the technicians blend in the laugh track with the help of a synthesizer. It's called "sweetening." It still works. It tells the audience at home what is supposed to be funny and actually helps people laugh because it is not easy to laugh alone.

So my proposal is that there is actually a laugh track which goes along with this intimidating book, which we do not ordinarily regard as a source of humor... this book which somehow doesn't feel right to us unless it is between two grimly black covers, in fine print, in double columns. "But they don't look like Bibles," someone said when we introduced our new edition in Presbyterian blue - even though cover and binding say fairly prominently, "Holy Bible." Maybe it should have one of those pictures of Mary and her baby smiling on the cover!

The laugh track is there from the beginning. The oldest formative story in the Bible - as soon as you get past creation, garden, Tower of Babel, and a lot of begetting and begatting - is about Sarah and Abraham, a story told and passed down through generations and written down back on the very edges of recorded human history. It's about an old man and old woman, nearing the end of their lives, to whom God - whose name they never pronounce by the way, but if they did it would have sounded something like "Jahweh" - tells them that they will be the mother and father of a great nation. With them, something brand new is going to start happening in human history.

"Sorry, not possible," they say, looking at each other a little sheepishly. "We have no children. Not that we didn't used to try a lot," Abraham adds and they both laugh what I think is the first laugh in the Bible, but it isn't in the text and then they become more serious, pensive, finally pathetic. "Barren" is the word their Semitic tongue assigns them: empty, dry, incomplete, infertile, inferior. It's the end of the line, literally, any day now, and who will tend the flocks? To make matters infinitely worse for Sarah, she had, as custom dictated, given her personal servant, Hagar, to Abraham. And they had done it - they had produced a wonderful baby boy, Ishmael, whose very existence was a daily and specific reminder to Sarah that the barrenness she and Abraham shared was her personal burden.

She loves Abraham and he still loves her although she can't hear that love anymore or feel it much, and it's been a very long time since they did anything about their love, a long time since they actually touched each other in any way that might remotely be called intimate.

So when Jahweh shows up again to talk about the nation Abraham and Sarah are going to produce and starts actually talking to Abraham about how to circumcise an eight-day-old baby boy, Abraham must have looked a little perplexed because Jahweh comes right to the point. "As for Sarah your wife, I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her."

And Abraham, right here in one of the oldest, most precious stories in the whole history of human stories, Abraham falls flat on his face in laughter.

You could look it up: Genesis 17:17 -

> "Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah who is ninety years old, bear a child?'"

Now the simple fact is that the one topic that has dominated the art of telling humorous stories, the joke, from the beginning of the history of story telling, is sex. Much, if not most of contemporary humor is about sex. That's why Abraham is flat on his face laughing in the presence of God. God has just told him a funny joke, a preposterous, "you gotta be kidding" kind of joke.

Later, some strangers happen along. (Sound familiar? It's the way many jokes begin.) After Sarah prepares a wonderful meal, one of the strangers - who turns out to be Jahewh - tells the joke to her. She's going to have a baby. And Sarah says, "in our old age, we're supposed to produce a baby," and the stranger catches her laughing. She embarrasses herself at how quickly she got the funny point. And so Sarah denies it.

"I did not laugh," she says. And God says, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

How are they going to do this? Embarrassing topic... about which we are inclined to laugh a little self-consciously, although the gerontologists over at Northwestern Hospital will tell you it's no great secret how Abraham and Sarah manage. And there is, by the way, a wonderful Eskimo dialect whose word for love-making is "laughing together." [And God Created Laughter, Conrad Hyers, p. 12]

And so Sarah conceived and bore a son and she said, "God has brought laughter for me," and they named him Isaac, the literal meaning of which is "laughter."

The history of Israel, Conrad Hyers observes, begins with a joke and a lot of laughing. Maybe that explains George Burns, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Henny Youngman, Alan King, Woody Allen.

What's so funny? Well sometimes it's not so funny. Sometimes the baby is not wanted and is abused, neglected, abandoned. Sometimes the baby is born addicted to crack. Sometimes, these days, the baby is born HIV positive and then wastes away and dies connected to a tangle of tubes and machines. Sometimes the baby is born with a genetic handicap. Sometimes the baby is stillborn. Sometimes it isn't funny at all.

The first and last time I preached on this text, I was 27 years old and the choir director who was in her 40s stormed up to me after the service and said, "Laughter my foot. Don and I just discovered that I'm pregnant and believe me, it isn't funny and I'm not laughing." But they did laugh and we all did, and Don is gone but Pauline and her son are still laughing.

Abraham's laughter and Sarah's laughter is, first of all, the laughter of disbelief, the natural human response to the preposterous, the utterly impossible. "You must be kidding! This is some kind of joke, isn't it?"

And it is a way of reminding us that there is always a scandal about faith. There is always something about religion that refuses to fit into our neat, tightly organized, rational lives. There is something about the idea of God which offends our logic and challenges our rational cause and effect approach to life. There is something about Christmas which wants to startle us out of our resignation to routine and to suggest that, by God's promise and grace, the preposterous - say peace on earth, or justice for poor people, or food for all, the end once-and-for-all of the tragic and stupid sin of racism - is not preposterous at all, but gloriously possible. They are certainly no more preposterous than the notion of God's birth in Bethlehem, no more preposterous than the very idea of God itself.

Conrad Hyers wrote:

> "We do not easily notice the (divine folly) - foolishness, for the story is so familiar, so comfortably blanketed in all the sentiments of Christmas... This birth has become such a normal, annually rehearsed event in the liturgical year, not to mention the shopping year, that it no longer surprises us or speaks to us. We forget what an improbable, almost preposterous story is it." [Ibid, p. 54]

The first laughter of Abraham and Sarah is laughter at the preposterous. But I think it quickly becomes nervous laughter. What if this is really going to happen? What if it's really true? Abraham and Sarah may be barren, but they are settled. They have a routine. It never varies. Up at 7:30 a.m., put the

coffee on, watch the news on the "Today Show," breakfast, walk the dog, get a paper, lunch, nap, take a walk, shop, cocktails with the evening news, dinner, watch a video, to bed with a book. It's barren - but comfortable.

Can you imagine introducing a newborn infant into that? If you have an occasional infant in your life, say an out-of-town grandchild, you know why Sarah's initial giggle became nervous laughter.

The issue is the incarnation: the most incredible claim anybody ever made, namely that in Mary's baby God was born into human history; that the man the baby became was as much of God as can be enfleshed, walking around Palestine 2,000 years ago; that he was the Christ, our lover, our reconciler, our redeemer, our savior. And that in him we are all eternally safe. And so if that's true, or even close to true, it's the most important single fact in human history and the one single fact, no matter who you are, with which you must come to terms. Do you believe it or not? Do you believe enough of it to start living as if it were true, start living as if you are safe and therefore free to give your life away? Do you believe or want to believe that in Jesus Christ you are so thoroughly accepted, forgiven and loved by God that you are redeemed - a new creation? Do you believe it enough to become an unapologetic and unashamed and unabashed lover of everybody?

No wonder there is nervous laughter.

Sarah and Abraham laugh because the idea of a birth is preposterous, but even more, it is postively frightenening.

And Elizabeth and Zechariah, another unlikely pair of older adults, can't believe when the promise comes to them.

And finally, in the fullness of time, when everything is ready, the angel comes to a young woman, a girl actually, whose name is Mary, and the angel says:

> "Greetings! The Lord is with you, and you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

"How can this be?" she asked, every bit as disbelieving, every bit as stunned as her sisters Elizabeth and Sarah, every bit as scared and nervous as any one of us might be - until she laughed and sang:

> "My soul magnifies the Lord,
> And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

And so the last laugh, the laughter Sarah meant when she said, "God has brought laughter to me" and then named her son "Laughter," is the laughter of affirmation.

"Laughter is the fundamental act of celebrating existence." Hyers observes that laughing happens "whenever people get together and say yes to life." [Ibid, p. 14]

And so there is laughter at festive meals, parties, weddings, birthdays. And lovemaking is laughter. And there is plenty of laughing going on as hostages are reunited with families, and after the tears, you can bet there was plenty of laughing last night when those seventy-year-old survivors at Pearl Harbor got around to storytelling. Laughing is a God-given way to say, "Yes" to life!

There is almost always laughing at baptisms. It is no sacrament for the humorless. And for a minister who takes himself or herself too seriously, it is a disaster waiting to happen because the baby will always upstage the minister which is perfectly appropriate, and whatever the baby does - cries, giggles, or just sits there looking around, regally, observing these peculiar proceedings - the people are going to laugh, which is a way finally of saying yes to life and yes to God, which is what young Mary finally got around to saying too.

The great Karl Barth, perhaps the most important theologian of the century, told a story in a Christmas sermon he preached at the University of Basel. An old, old friend had telephoned and was complaining about this and that: her arthritis and aches and pains, her persistent depression. She wanted scholarly counsel, a philosophic rationale for the existence of pain, perhaps.

The learned theologian responded instead with an old German nursery rhyme:

> "The Good Lord thought of me today,
> He gave me lots of fun.
> He watches me and blesses me
> My place is in the Sun."
> [Deliverance to the Captives, p.105]

The laughter of affirmation. The laughter of joy too powerful for words. The laughter, which is not far from tears because sometimes we believe things and trust things we couldn't begin to explain.

So the ancient world knew Christians as the people who sing at funerals. And so, after the funeral, when the family gathers around the table later that evening, when the guests and well-

wishers are all gone, there is often laughter - the holiest of all sounds - an affirmation of life, an expression of trust that all is well, a "yes" to a love that not even death overcomes.

It is the laughter you can hear in this lovely season - the excitement of children and the wise laughter of the older ones. You can hear it in the lilting music of Advent. A laughter reflected in the smiles of Madonna and child, all the way back to old Abraham, and Sarah - who really has spoken for each and every one of us.

"God has brought laughter for me."